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# The Rhetoric of Rescue

Mary Blakeman

*Western Kentucky University*

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Mary Elizabeth  
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THE RHETORIC OF RESCUE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication  
and Broadcasting

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Mary Elizabeth Blakeman

April, 1990

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THE RHETORIC OF RESCUE

Date Recommended 4/23/90

Larry Winn

Director of Thesis

Carl Kell

Randall Egge

Date Approved May 14, 1990

Elmer Gray

Dean of the Graduate College



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THE RHETORIC OF RESCUE

Mary Elizabeth Blakeman

111 Pages

Directed by: Dr. Larry Winn, Dr. Carl Kell and

Dr. Randy Capps

Department of Communication

Western Kentucky University

This thesis examines the television reporters' verbal depictions of two rescue events, the rescue of Jessica McClure in 1987 and the rescue of three whales at Pt. Barrow, Alaska in 1988, in order to discover what rhetorical techniques were used to appeal to the public interest. Analog criticism, metaphorical analysis and pentadic analysis were used to discover the dominant language reporters chose. Three main conclusions were drawn from this analysis: (1) use of the dramatistic pentad showed how reporters focused public attention away from the purpose, (2) verbal and visual depictions cannot be separated when studying television news stories and (3) two different styles of depiction were used to portray two very similar events.

## Chapter 1: In the beginning...

A man lies trapped beneath the earth in western Kentucky. A rock has fallen on his left foot and he cannot move it; nor can he move his arms that also have become trapped. It is dark and cold and water is dripping on the man's face. The only way to get to the victim is through a long, muddy treacherous tunnel. Once a rescuer reaches the man, little can be done for him. The close quarters do not allow for maneuvering. Some time later, after the rescuers leave, there is a tunnel collapse. No one can get to the victim and rescuers grow uneasy about the possible outcome.

A different situation exists on the surface. A carnival-like atmosphere surrounds the area. People have come from miles around to get a glimpse of the rescue operation. Vendors are selling refreshments and souvenirs; a minister is conducting a church service; and families are picnicking. Reporters are everywhere, interviewing anyone even remotely involved. The man at the center of the rescue is unknown and unseen by most of the crowd.



The rescue described above was real. It happened in February, 1925, just a few miles from Cave City, Kentucky. The man trapped in Sand Cave (actually a hole) was Floyd Collins. Collins died in that hole approximately three days before rescue workers reached him on April 16.

For those few days in February, 1925, Floyd Collins was the biggest news story in the nation. After Skeets Miller, a Louisville Courier-Journal reporter, interviewed the trapped Collins, the story grew exponentially. Newspapers across the country followed the rescue, inventing what they could not find. The nation responded with donations of money, equipment, and volunteers.

Speculation about the reason Collins received so much attention has probably existed since February, 1925. Some say the reason for the publicity surrounding the Collins' rescue is the newspaper. Newspapers, however, only distribute what a reporter writes. Living souls of the newspapers translate events into stories. Perhaps the storytellers, the reporters, were responsible for the attention the Collins' rescue received.

Speculation also may have arisen about whether the type of publicity surrounding the Collins' rescue was a one-time occurrence. Two instances, one in 1987 and one in 1988, suggest not. These stories

unfolded with the reporters on the scene. The public's attention, and therefore the media's, remained focused on those two events until their completion.

#### DATA

The first event occurred in Midland, Texas, in October 1987. Eighteen-month-old Jessica McClure fell into a well shaft while playing. Within twenty-four hours, the story of the trapped child made all three network newscasts. Network news coverage continued until the successful completion of the rescue some 56 hours later.

The second event occurred in October, 1988, off Pt. Barrow, Alaska. Three Gray whales stayed too long to feed in the shallow waters off Pt. Barrow and became trapped by surrounding ice. Within days, the whales became international celebrities. The event would require hundreds of thousands of dollars, the work of environmentalists, oil companies, the Coast Guard and Eskimo whalers, and finally the cooperation of the United States and Soviet Union. The whales made network television coverage all over the world.



## RESEARCH QUESTION

This paper will examine these two rescue efforts focusing on the verbal depictions of the reporters covering the stories. These events are unique because of the public interest in them. Possibly a connection exists between the reporters' stories and the amount of public interest. This paper will examine the television reporters' verbal depictions of the two rescue events in order to discover what rhetorical techniques were used to appeal to the public interest.

## RATIONALE

These kinds of rescue events have an inherent "human interest" value. Human nature wills us to believe that a rescue will happen. As humans, we identify strongly with the will to live. However, even beyond human nature, the media may play a part in helping the viewers to identify with the victim. This paper seeks to determine how television reporters may add to the natural human interest surrounding a rescue by the language they choose to use to report the stories. Verbal as well as visual depictions are being examined. Human beings must translate visual depictions into stories.

The immediacy of television makes it a suitable medium for this study. Newspapers and magazines have a considerable lag time from occurrence of an event to publication of the story. Thus, television coverage more than that of newspapers and magazines should be able to create empathy for victims of a rescue.

#### METHODOLOGY

This analysis uses an analog approach to criticism. According to Rosenfield, "The objective of such a method of comparison and contrast is two-fold: to specify the fundamental anatomical features which relate the two speeches and to assess the relative artistic merit of each speech, compared to the other."<sup>2</sup> This thesis will employ analog criticism to compare the depictions of the two rescue events. Using analog method one examines commonalties in the depictions of the two rescue events, differences in those depictions and what conclusions may be drawn about the two events based on their commonalties and differences. For example, differences suggest the question: Is something particular to the event that caused the reporters to treat the rescue differently?

The comparison will focus on the language of depiction, especially on reporters' use of metaphors.<sup>3</sup> As Osborn points out, the metaphor has special potency



as a means of depiction. In the "new rhetoric," he writes, "metaphor must take its place as a unique means of apprehension, as a devil of depiction superimposing its often radical transformations upon the mind."<sup>4</sup> Metaphors can "surprise and arrest"<sup>5</sup> the mind and cause it to process information in terms of relationships. Radically different categories cause the mind to pause and visualize the new relationship it has been given. Once the mind has accomplished visualization of the new relationship, the visualization may persist because of its novelty: "The result is that metaphor can yield an especially intense, vivid and persistent depiction."<sup>6</sup>

Metaphors can actually structure reality within the mind. Metaphor causes one to think in relationships, and these relationships can influence our perceptions of reality. If a situation is continually portrayed through a specific metaphor, then people are asked to draw upon certain frames of reference to establish the symbolic relationships within their minds.<sup>7</sup>

Archetypal metaphors have a particular persuasive appeal. "Archetypes are words that anchor a group in its human identity."<sup>8</sup> Archetypes, including references to storm/calm, disease/cure, war/peace, light/dark and high/low, are common to all people in all times. This universality accounts for some

of the persuasiveness of archetypes: "Because of a certain universality of appeal provided by their attachment to basic, commonly shared motives, the speaker can expect such metaphors to touch the greater part of his audience."<sup>9</sup>

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication literature ignores the subject of rescue. A check of Matlon's Index to Journals in Communication Studies reveals no citations under rescue. Although rescues have not been studied, Mumby and Spitzack did a metaphoric analysis of the language used by television reporters covering political stories.<sup>10</sup> These writers feel that the metaphors used to portray political stories influence the viewers' perception of those stories. In other words, what is seen as real on television depends, in part on the way people conceptualize the world, a conceptualization that metaphor can help shape.

Mumby and Spitzack found three main clusters of metaphors through which the stories were portrayed: (1) politics is war (2) politics is a game, and (3) politics is a dramatic performance. These clusters enhance our understanding of politics. Each of these metaphors must make sense when used in the context of the story. However, "this does not mean that the



viewer must be consciously aware of the metaphoric structures used; on the contrary, important to our position is the notion that much of what is said in news broadcasts will be interpreted literally rather than metaphorically."<sup>11</sup> If experience is shaped metaphorically as Lakoff and Johnson contend,<sup>12</sup> then the reality presented in a newscast depends on the metaphoric structures used.<sup>13</sup>

Although only Mumby and Spitzack's research relates directly to this thesis, metaphorical analyses abound. For example, Perry examined Hitler's infestation metaphors during World War II.<sup>14</sup> Perry concluded that Hitler's disease metaphors did not supplement but in fact, constituted argument. Because of our fear and repugnance for disease, disease metaphors only have to be felt, not proven argumentatively.<sup>15</sup>

Infestation metaphors served a dual purpose for Hitler, simultaneously de-humanizing the Jews and explaining how the Jews were actually a dangerous threat to the German nation. According to Perry, "The Jew was like the disease-causing microbe, the internal parasite, or the secretly administered poison, wreaking an invisible but ultimately fatal havoc on the national body."<sup>16</sup> The infestation metaphor seemed to remove any moral obligation to the Jews, bestowing on Hitler the powerful symbolic role of the physician

whom one gives carte-blanche to eradicate the infection.

According to Perry, studying figurative language in appreciation of its power apart from a moral context is important. Perry suggests other examples for study such as society's catalog of denigrating terms for women, blacks, homosexuals and the handicapped. He wrote, "All of these metaphors call up specific valuative connotations associated with the vehicle of the metaphor, and all promote a fundamental de-humanization of the subjects to whom they are applied."<sup>17</sup>

An article examining Winston Churchill's use of archetypal metaphors during World War II further illuminates the power of metaphor.<sup>18</sup> According to Rickert, "Churchill did not merely describe the ongoing war, he translated it; replacing literal circumstance with metaphorical condition."<sup>19</sup> Rickert examined Churchill's use of four types of archetypal metaphors: light-dark and vertical scale metaphors, ingestion and cleansing, stormy weather, and travel on a sea, down a river and especially up a path.

The first category is light-dark and vertical scale. These metaphors established a consistent setting for the events taking place, light always being above and darkness always below. These metaphors



allowed a clear distinction between good and evil. Light and above represented good; darkness and below represented evil. Churchill warned about the impending darkness but his warnings were largely ignored: "In 1930, he told the House of Commons that he had 'watched this famous island descending incontinently, recklessly, the stairway which leads to a dark gulf.'"<sup>20</sup> The implicit presence of the sun gave cause for hope of a new day in the light-dark metaphor. However, Britain could not rely on the sun's rising. Britain bore the weight of leading the fight against the forces of darkness in Churchill's metaphors.

The second set of metaphors in Churchill's rhetoric was the ingestion and cleansing metaphors. The ingestion metaphor had two significant aspects: First, Churchill spoke of eating primarily before, not during the war, and second, he never spoke of the British being devoured. Had Churchill's ingestional metaphors referred directly to the people to whom he was speaking, these images would have been too gruesome to be effective. During the war itself, Churchill switched to cleansing metaphors. The world needed to be cleansed of Hitler and his legions. According to Rickert, the switch was best accounted for by the essentially positive nature of the cleansing metaphors.

The storm metaphor accomplished a different objective. This metaphor translated the violence of raging battles into the fury of raging storms, thus presenting a familiar peril against which the nation needed to arm itself. Throughout the war Churchill referred to the storm that the country would have to weather. After Germany and Japan surrendered, the storm metaphor was dropped; the sun had come out.

Charting a course, whether it be on the sea, down a river, or up a path, appeared in Churchill's rhetoric toward the end of the war. Churchill chose not to develop the river or sea metaphors; other than on a few occasions, the metaphor that endured was "up a path." England was on a path that led upward into the light. England's path began in darkness, but since their's was the true path, perserverance on it would lead England safely out of danger. In a final review of the war, Churchill said: "When we look back on all the perils through which we have passed and at the mighty foes we have laid low and all the dark and deadly designs we have frustrated, why should we fear for our future: We have come safely through the worse";<sup>21</sup> thus England's journey had ended.

Unlike other critics, Osborn and Osborn analyze figures of speech as they apply to the visual forms in the German propaganda film Triumph of the Will.<sup>22</sup> They observe the use of metaphor, metonymy, and



synecdoche. According to Osborn and Osborn, metaphor "serves to establish perspective, an induced or borrowed context superimposed on a subject in order to suggest its identity."<sup>23</sup> This figure of speech differs from metonymy which "works to build associations, and is often useful to connect new subjects with potent, established symbolic forms."<sup>24</sup> Synecdoche focuses and magnifies only those aspects of a subject that will convey the meaning of the rhetor or the motive of the culture which the rhetor unwittingly expresses. Osborn and Osborn contend, "Synecdoche fragments and distorts subject matter until the figure reflects an idea of the subject more than the subject itself."<sup>25</sup>

Osborn and Osborn find archetypal metaphors within the visual form of the film. Hitler descends from the clouds (vertical scale); the rally in the film was shot at night with Hitler's obedient masses carrying torches into the night (light-dark); and Hitler is even likened to a God in one scene; his head seems to be haloed as he receives the adoration of the multitudes. Still another scene "reinforces the messianic presence of the Fuhrer by capturing the sun as it is refracted in the upraised palm of his hand."<sup>26</sup> Hitler became the Savior to the German people in these scenes, a God-metaphor at work.

Metaphor and metonymy are fused in the representation of tools in one scene. The scene shows long columns of workers holding shovels as though they were rifles. In the scene the leader announces, "We are soldiers, with our hammers, axes, shovels, hoes, and spade--We are the young troops of the Reich."<sup>27</sup> The tools stand for weapons and at the same time suggest by association the building of the New Order. The tools tap both the war metaphor and the building archetype.

Osborn and Osborn concluded that metonymy worked best in the heroic depiction of Hitler himself. The film repeatedly showed Hitler against a backdrop of huge architectural forms with a background of Teutonic music, all this suggesting the strength of Germany and depicting Hitler as the personification of that strength.

Synecdocheal embodiments in the film included marching, singing, and saluting. Marching represented idealized behavior under the new regime; singing symbolized the positive group-oriented attitude one must maintain in the Third Reich and saluting signified the absolute rejection of the self for the new Germany.

The application to the visual medium may prove useful for examining television depiction. Certainly television news, often presented live from the scene, lacks the careful choreography of film. Still



reporters do strive to get the best look for the stand-up, the on-the-scene report. This small bit of framing may play a part in the visual depictions of metaphors the television audience may see.

#### ANALOG CRITICISM

Although little has been done in analog criticism, Rosenfield has contributed an analog criticism of the Nixon "Checkers" speech, in which Nixon explained to the public his use of a special campaign fund and ex-President Harry Truman's answer to charges that while president he allowed a Communist agent, Harry Dexter White, to hold high governmental office.<sup>28</sup> Rosenfield finds four areas of similarity and three areas of difference.

First, Rosenfield examined the similarities.<sup>29</sup> Both speeches were a part of a short, decisive clash of views. Each speaker also went beyond defensive remarks to criticize his accusers. In addition, both the Nixon and the Truman speeches placed most facts in the middle third of the speech. Finally, both speakers resembled previous arguments. Rosenfield concluded that those shared characteristics may suggest commonalities in speeches of apologia.

There were three ways in which these two speakers put their own personalities into their messages:

(1) the manner in which the inferential pattern controlled the form of the address (2) the degree to which the speaker channeled his attack and thereby directed his listeners' aggression and (3) the percentage of public-personal explanations which became prominent in messages using electronic media.<sup>30</sup>

From this analysis, Rosenfield drew several conclusions. First, an apologist's resort to invective may be inevitable given the circumstances. Second, in order to judge the weight of evidence of such a speech, formal standards must be distinguished. Last, the most interesting short-coming of Nixon's speech, compared with Truman's, was its endurance in the public mind and its capacity to outlast the demands of the occasion. The speech's emotionalism did not wear well, and together with later events, contributed to Nixon's image as a manipulator.

#### POPULAR LITERATURE

No academic journals contain articles on rescue; however, many stories of rescue appear in the popular culture literature. Articles about rescue appear in magazines ranging from Time to Popular Mechanics. Rescue seems to be a favorite topic of Reader's Digest, three entries of rescue appeared in 1987 alone.<sup>31</sup> One may subdivide rescue into several areas: wildlife



rescue, mine rescue, fire rescue, ice rescue and search and rescue, among others.

Clearly the media did not ignore the Jessica McClure rescue and the rescue of the whales at Pt. Barrow, Alaska. The Jessica McClure story appeared in People Weekly,<sup>32</sup> Time,<sup>33</sup> Newsweek,<sup>34</sup> and among the more unusual entries were Runner's World<sup>35</sup> and Modern Healthcare.<sup>36</sup> Articles on the whales were found in Time,<sup>37</sup> National Geographic World,<sup>38</sup> Health,<sup>39</sup> and U.S. News and World Report.<sup>40</sup>

In popular culture literature stories about rescue share a common theme--adventure. These articles describe rescue as if they are fictional adventures being developed. The reader is brought back to reality in the closing paragraphs. These articles seem to say that adventure only takes place in fiction, not in real life.

A recently published book by Tom Rose, tells the story of the rescue of the whales at Pt. Barrow, Alaska. This book focuses on the media's role during the rescue.<sup>41</sup> Rose tells the story through the eyes of a reporter who actually covered the event. Far from an academic endeavor, the book discusses the media's role in creating the "event," and the media's manipulation of people and resources. Rose briefly discusses stories the media "missed" and examines the mechanics and absurdities of covering such a story.

Rose fails, however, to examine the language of such stories; being a reporter himself, Rose may be too close to the subject to examine objectively the role of the reporters' depictions in the rescue.



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## Chapter 2: Between a Rock and a Hard Place.

The rescue of Jessica McClure began October 14, 1987, after Reba McClure discovered that her eighteen-month-old daughter had fallen down an abandoned well shaft. Rescue efforts began as soon as the authorities were notified. Oil drilling machinery was brought to the site in Midland, Texas, to dig a rescue tunnel to the trapped child. A microphone was dropped down the well shaft to determine if the child was alive. When those listening heard crying, heat and oxygen were pumped down the shaft in an effort to make the child as comfortable as possible. Rescue efforts continued from mid-morning on October 14 until the rescue some fifty-six hours later on October 16, 1987.

The rescue of Jessica McClure first appeared on network news on October 15, almost a day-and-a-half after the rescue had begun. On October 16, the McClure story led two of the three network newscasts. The significance of this fact becomes apparent when one notes some of the other news stories of that day. On October 16, 1987, the stock market plunged a record one hundred points, an Iranian missile struck a United States flagged tanker off the coast of Kuwait, and then-First Lady Nancy Reagan was being tested for

possible breast cancer. Yet with all of these events happening, Jessica McClure's rescue led the newscast on ABC and CBS on October 16.

Jessica McClure was rescued on October 16, after network newstime (6:00 P.M., EST). To cover the event live, networks broke into prime-time programming with reports from the scene, the only way to cover the event that day since network newscasts do not run at 11:00 P.M. like local newscasts. CBS and NBC had a Saturday newscast; thus they had the story the next day. ABC, which did not have a Saturday newscast, had to wait the additional day to cover the story. On Monday, October 19, all three networks again covered the story.

Examination of the networks' broadcasts<sup>1</sup> of the Jessica McClure rescue reveals no consistent use of a single metaphor or cluster of metaphors. The story best lends itself to chronological analysis. This chapter will examine the reporters' verbal depictions of the event, as well as the influence the visual aspects of the event may have had on the reporters' depictions.

As stated earlier, the story of Jessica McClure first appeared on network news on October 15. The stories of October 15 provided the public with the basic facts of the rescue. Jessica McClure had been playing with friends in the backyard of her mother's



day care center on October 14. When Reba McClure left the children to answer the telephone, Jessica McClure somehow fell into an eight-inch abandoned water well shaft. The child fell approximately twenty feet before coming to rest on her back in a small area. (The term "approximate" is used because each network gave a different depth ranging from twenty to twenty-two feet.<sup>2</sup>)

After the child was discovered in the well, rescue workers were called in. The workers lowered a microphone down the well to determine if the child was alive. After hearing crying, rescue workers pumped warm air and oxygen down the well to the child. At this point, the rescue strategy was decided and begun.

This strategy involved digging a tunnel parallel to the well shaft. The rescue tunnel would be dug down below the child and then rescue workers would tunnel over and up to get to her. Reporters gave two reasons for the complicated rescue procedure. First, workers feared that if they tried to pull the child from the well from a position above her, she might slip out of their hands and fall farther down the well; second, workers feared that coming at the child from above her could cause the old well to collapse upon her.

Although the rescue strategy began quickly, the hardness of the rock made the progress extremely slow.



By the time the rescue appeared on network television, rescue workers had been working on the tunnel for nearly thirty hours. During the newscasts of October 15, rescuers predicted that the child would be out that night, possibly as late as midnight.

Each network chose a similar sound byte<sup>3</sup> from the child's father,<sup>4</sup> and CBS and NBC chose similar sound bytes to explain the hardness of the rock.<sup>5</sup> Dan Rather, anchor of the CBS Evening News, gave an elaborate description of the pipe into which the child fell, displaying an identical-sized pipe at the news desk.<sup>6</sup>

The stories of October 15 left viewers with two impressions. First, that the accident had been a freak accident and second, that the child would soon be rescued and everything would be all right. The networks gave viewers the impressions of a freak accident in a variety of ways. Dan Rather actually said the term in his lead-in:<sup>7</sup> "Bob McNamara reports on the freak accident that got her there."<sup>8</sup> CBS also chose a sound byte from an acquaintance of the McClure's that stated that the accident could not have been prevented, further emphasizing its uniqueness: "She couldn't have prevented it."<sup>9</sup> ABC's Peter Jennings told viewers that the child had fallen "into a small, abandoned well in Midland, Texas."<sup>10</sup> These statements may have added interest to the story

by arousing the curiosity of the audience. News must have something different or unusual to tell an audience; thus framing the accident as a freak occurrence may have been a function of turning a story into news. However, the story in itself had natural human interest because of the child involved. Therefore, this framing of the accident may have been an attempt to add interest to what might have seemed a routine story of a child in trouble.

The newscasts left viewers with the impression that the rescue would soon occur and the child would be fine. The networks accomplished this in two ways. First, each network chose the sound byte of Jessica McClure's father in which he predicted his daughter's successful rescue: "But with the Lord's help and your prayers, we know that little girl is going to make it."<sup>11</sup> Second, the network correspondents of ABC and CBS predicted that the child would be out soon: "Workers hope that they'll be able to bring the child out anytime now and they're extremely encouraged because they recently heard the child saying nursery rhymes and actually singing to herself,"<sup>12</sup> or "But even as hours pass the toddler seems to have two things in her favor: the efforts of rescuers above and whatever it is inside the little girl that's kept her clinging to life."<sup>13</sup> Dan Rather added to the CBS correspondent's prediction by saying: "In a late



report from our people at the scene, rescue workers now do not expect to reach the trapped girl until midnight."<sup>14</sup>

NBC chose not to make predictions of the child's rescue. NBC ended its story on a more ominous note: "Everyone's aware that as digging inches ahead, Jessica is becoming more dehydrated and the danger to her is increasing."<sup>15</sup> NBC did give viewers the assurance that the child would be okay earlier in the story by telling viewers that the child seemed to be in relatively good health: "She appears to be holding up well, mentally and physically."<sup>16</sup> These impressions of a freak accident and imminent rescue gave indications that the story probably would not be back in the news.

On October 16, however, Jessica McClure remained trapped in the well and still in the news. After two-and-a-half days, rescuers had not been able to free the child. They had gotten to her, broken through the casing of the well and actually touched Jessica McClure; however, the hole had not been enlarged enough to bring the child out. The stories of October 16 focused on the events of the previous twenty-four hours.

Rescuers had been working around the clock. Volunteers spent the day and night digging in thirty to forty-minute shifts in the rescue tunnel.



Volunteers had taken time from work to help. Prayer vigils had been held and a trust fund had been set up to help the McClure's defray costs because they had no medical insurance. Reporters again gave predictions that the child would be rescued that night; some reporters said the child could be out within the hour.

The stories of October 16 left viewers with different impressions than the stories of October 15. Viewers' attention had been focused away from the victim and onto the rescuers. The networks did this by allowing the rescuers to speak for themselves through various sound bytes. The viewers did not hear the questions asked the rescuers, but the answers given left viewers with the frustrations of the rescuers:

CBS:       It's rough down there, it's,  
              when you're working it's full  
              of dust, it's damp in the bottom  
              and you don't have much room and  
              it's kind of frustrating cause  
              your drill bits just don't<sup>17</sup>  
              do anything to that rock.

NBC:        It was a helpless feeling. You  
              could hear her crying and you  
              know you wanted to reach down  
              there and get her and there's<sup>18</sup>  
              just no way to do it.

ABC:        I guess the most thing I wish  
              I had twenty-foot arms where I  
              could reach down there and get  
              her.<sup>19</sup>

Well, I got two babies of my own  
I expect<sup>20</sup> somebody to do it  
for me.

These words from the rescuers gave viewers a sharper image of the activity in the rescue tunnel. Viewers saw an ordinary-looking man, in his twenties or thirties, covered with dust and sweat, talking about how it felt in the rescue tunnel. This provided a powerful image, more powerful than a reporter in clean shirt and tie describing what others said about the rescue tunnel. Although viewers could not see the trapped child, they could see the men who had gone after her. Seeing these men and listening to them speak gave viewers a strong sense of identification. Although viewers could not be at the rescue scene, after hearing a rescuer's description upon leaving the tunnel, they could seemingly feel the dampness and the dust flying, see the sparks and hear the screams of the trapped child. After these rescuers had spoken, mentally, viewers were on the scene.

While viewers got a more graphic image of the scene from the rescuers they also got the impression of impending rescue from the reporters. Comments such as "The rescuers are hoping to get to her and out within the hour, however, it could be a while longer than that."<sup>21</sup> Or "Officials insist that they are very close to pulling Jessica out, that it will be no more than a few hours,"<sup>22</sup> told viewers that the ordeal was almost over. NBC expressed the



prediction vividly: "Connie, we can only hope that we're on the verge of a very joyous moment here. The preparations seem like they're being made to try again to lower paramedics down into the tunnel and try to put little Jessica onto a backboard, strap her on and bring her out."<sup>23</sup> These predictions simultaneously added suspense to the situation and gave a positive note to the stories; everything would be fine.

The predictions of the reporters proved to be true. Jessica McClure was rescued October 16, but not until after network newstime. The next opportunity networks had for a story about the rescue came Saturday, October 17. This left ABC with a time lag of a day because that network did not have a Saturday newscast. CBS and NBC had the scoop.

The stories of October 17 focused on the recovery of Jessica McClure and the relief of her mother. After being pulled from the rescue tunnel Jessica McClure was taken to Midland Memorial Hospital. Once there, doctors determined that she had survived her ordeal well. The main health concern was her right foot. Because the foot had been contorted above her head during the entrapment, it had been deprived of circulation. Physicians were unsure if they would be able to save the foot. Otherwise, she needed only minor plastic surgery on her forehead. People from



all over the country showed their concern for the child in the form of gifts and phone calls to check on her condition and send good wishes. Reba McClure, the child's mother, expressed her relief at having her daughter back. Mrs. McClure told the press that her daughter had said "'mama' and that she wants her bottle and she said 'pooh,' Winnie-the-Pooh."<sup>24</sup>

Viewers were left with two different feelings depending on which broadcast of the 17th they saw. If viewers saw the NBC broadcast, they got feelings of joy and elation that the little girl was safe and life could go on as it had before: "Reba McClure was a picture of joy as she unwrapped a present bound to delight her daughter, Jessica."<sup>25</sup> The present was a giant-sized Winnie-the-Pooh bear. This brought to mind memories of childhood, when a giant stuffed animal could make all the hurt and bad times go away. The NBC story touched a sentimental note by showing the actual rescue moment in slow motion and celebrating the rescuers: "They did it. The policemen, firemen, oil field workers of Midland had set themselves to the task and this triumph belonged to them."<sup>26</sup> The parting phrase was sentimental as well: "She's a fighter, her spirit held on and she's safe."<sup>27</sup> The story gave the same feeling as movies that are known as "tear-jerkers." Every opportunity for sentiment was taken, from showing the giant Winnie-the-Pooh

(Jessica talked about Winnie-the-Pooh during her entrapment) to showing the rescue in slow motion. On an intellectual level, viewers knew the story was "going for tears," but on an emotional level, they probably did not care. The story seemed intended not so much to glorify Jessica or her rescuers as to make the viewers feel good. Jessica McClure had been hurt, trapped, and scared but most importantly she had been saved. Adults cannot save all the children in the world who are hurt or scared or in trouble, but they did save this one and that made everyone feel good. Those were the feelings NBC left with the viewers.

If viewers saw the CBS news story of October 17, the impression they got was quite different. The story provided the same basic information: her foot might have to be amputated, her recovery was going well, and the story pointed out the tremendous amount of interest shown in the way of gifts and calls to the hospital. The CBS story, however, made a point of what Jessica McClure's ordeal had done for Midland. Residents spoke for themselves, through various sound bytes, about what they thought the event had done for the community (Viewers did not hear the questions; questions had to be assumed from the answers):



I think it's really pulled Midland together, united the people.<sup>28</sup>

It doesn't matter if you're a millionaire or just a regular worker,<sup>29</sup> everybody gives what they can.

The CBS story called the rescuers "heroes," the first mention of the word: "There were even some new heroes, like Robert O'Donnell, a key man in the final rescue."<sup>30</sup>

Like heroes, the volunteers did not quit until the job was done. The volunteers went back to the rescue shaft and closed it. The CBS story of October 17 was the only story throughout the network coverage of the rescue event to point out that both the rescue tunnel and the well shaft had been filled in by the volunteers. The well was capped with a plate reading: "To Jessica, Oct. 16, 1987, from all of us."<sup>31</sup>

The CBS story left viewers with feelings that the rescuers had completed the job. The CBS story had no slow motion or sentimental parting statement from the reporter. The CBS story had a "down home" feeling to it. The residents and the heroes spoke for themselves: "To me, there's no one particular person, I just happened to be the one that got her out of the well."<sup>32</sup> Spoken like a true hero. Even the parting shot of the story was simple, just a picture of the plate on the well as the reporter read it. The story ended simply, leaving viewers to feel



as if that was how the rescuers wanted to be remembered: plain, simple people who did the job that had to be done.

As indicated earlier, ABC had a disadvantage because of the one day time delay. Because most of the country already knew the outcome of the rescue by October 18, ABC had to come up with a different angle in order for the story to be news. President Reagan telephoned the McClures to let them know how all of America felt about the rescue: "Everybody in America became godfathers and godmothers of Jessica."<sup>33</sup> Vice President Bush made a stop at Midland Memorial Hospital. These two events gave ABC the new angle it needed: Jessica McClure's rescue was now an election story.

The ABC story focused on Vice President Bush's stop in Midland and his address to the rescuers: "So when Barbara and I heard what was happening, well we took it very personally, as if it were happening to one of our own, and then I realized that that's exactly the way everybody in the United States of America felt about it."<sup>34</sup> The video showed the Vice President talking to rescuers and leaving the hospital as he headed back out on the campaign trail.

Jessica McClure was treated as an afterthought in this story. The story told viewers that flowers and gifts continued to come into the hospital and

that doctors had become more optimistic about saving the child's right foot. However, the story focused on the political angle, leaving one with the feeling that Jessica McClure was no more than another stop on the campaign trail.

On October 19, Jessica McClure appeared on all three networks for the last time in connection with the actual rescue. The ABC and NBC stories were reduced to one-shots, stories with no video and a box in the corner of the screen. The stories that appeared on ABC and NBC were very similar. Both stories gave essentially the same information, that physicians still were not sure if the right foot could be saved but that they were more optimistic about the outcome. A longer CBS story gave the same information, but focused on how life in Midland returned to normal.

The CBS story focused on the rescuers. CBS interviewed Robert O'Donnell, the paramedic who pulled Jessica from the well, and could not have asked for better timing. During O'Donnell's interview, the alarm went off and he had to make a "run" (rescue jargon for going to the scene of an accident or trauma): "Normality, I don't know how long it will take for that to actually set in, maybe when the alarm goes off again [alarm begins to sound] whether it was God's help or whatever, just all over it was



. . . if you all will stand by for one minute, I've got to see what we've got here."<sup>35</sup> For O'Donnell, life returned to normal that instant and CBS viewers got to watch.

The CBS story focused not only on the paramedics in the rescue, but also on a man who had taken time off from his job of building bridges to help, "We don't consider ourselves heroes or nothing like that, we just doing something that had to be done."<sup>36</sup> The story emphasized that life had been hard in Midland for the last few years; "The oil bust has meant hard times in this part of the country. . . . For folks out here, Jessica is the hero, Jessica is a reason to be proud again."<sup>37</sup> This left viewers with the feeling that one little girl gave a down-and-out community a feeling of pride, that the ordeal of Jessica McClure had restored pride to a community that had lost it.

In the October 19 newscasts, all three networks changed the wording of the duration of time the child spent in the well. The time became "two-and-a-half days" instead of the more dramatic "fifty-six hours." After the successful rescue of the child, this may have been an attempt to put the rescue into less dramatic, albeit accurate terms.



### CONCLUSIONS

The chronological analysis yields five major conclusions about the networks' depictions of the Jessica McClure rescue. First, the networks chose to depict the rescue in literal language. Phrases such as "inching ahead"<sup>38</sup> which are usually considered figurative had a literal meaning in this rescue since the hardness of the rocks meant that rescue workers were going forward slowly, inch-by-inch. Other phrases that may be considered figurative appeared, e.g. "pulling together to pull out a little girl."<sup>39</sup> Rescue workers did actually pull Jessica McClure from the well, and in the process took turns operating machinery and helping to pull one another from the well. "Child's play"<sup>40</sup> usually refers to an easy task; however, in this case the term was literal. Officials believed that Jessica McClure fell into the well while playing with other children. All three networks chose this literal style.

The exception to this use of literal language occurred in two CBS broadcasts. The word "flooded," the only metaphor used during the rescue coverage, appeared twice. The term was used to describe the influx of volunteers: "and volunteers flooded in."<sup>41</sup> Second, reporters described the hospital as "flooded

with gifts and phone calls from all over the country."<sup>42</sup> The use of the word "flooded" may be significant, particularly the first time it was used, because the remainder of the language was literal. The word "flooded" suggested, of course, that huge numbers of volunteers arrived quickly.

The word "flooded" also appeared after the child had been rescued. After the rescue the network stories took on a different air. Sentiment ruled the stories, and the word "flooded" may have fit in better with the emotional language of those stories.

Network depictions also relied heavily on concreteness, both in terms of language and visuals. The network stories needed to give viewers a sharp, mental image of the scene since viewers could not see Jessica McClure in the well. Viewers saw scenes of rescue workers, covered with dirt and sweat, as they came out of the rescue tunnel and they also were shown the lines of volunteers waiting to take their turn in the tunnel. Viewers heard from the rescuers themselves what it felt like in the tunnel: "When I'm using that hammer down there, uh, there are sparks coming off the bit. That's how hard the rock is that we're working against."<sup>43</sup> After listening to this dirty, sweaty man, viewers could then imagine seeing the sparks from the drill bit, the smell of the sparks, the dust and the dampness of the tunnel. Viewers

could imagine working in the semi-darkness and feel the heat of the drill.

Viewers got the chance to hear Jessica McClure for themselves on the ABC broadcast. After rescue workers sent down a microphone, they called to the child, trying to get a response. The ABC broadcast used an audio recording of the child and viewers heard Jessica McClure cry. All of these choices on the part of the networks gave viewers a sharp mental image of the rescue scene. Using both pictures and the rescue workers' own words added concreteness to the stories. The concreteness added to the viewers' sense of identification with the rescue workers and added to their concern for the trapped child.

Redundancy appeared in the media's references to the child's size throughout the rescue. In the stories of October 15, reporters told viewers that Jessica McClure was eighteen-months-old. This statement should have been enough to give viewers an idea of the size of the child. The networks, however, referred to Jessica McClure as a "toddler," "little girl," and "tiny Jessica McClure." Obviously these adjectives were unnecessary when referring to an eighteen-month-old child.

The networks also became redundant in their descriptions of the well shaft and the rescue tunnel as being below ground. The words "well" or "tunnel"



should have been all the description necessary, but the networks chose to emphasize this point with phrases such as the following ones:

ABC: Rescue workers have just changed shifts<sup>44</sup>  
and completed a shaft twenty feet down.<sup>44</sup>  
. . . to an abandoned water well. She<sup>45</sup>  
dropped twenty feet. . . .

CBS: . . . at the bottom of a well.<sup>46</sup>  
. . . trapped twenty-one feet down an  
abandoned water well for the second day.<sup>47</sup>

Aside from being told that Jessica McClure was below the surface of the earth, viewers saw graphics illustrating the rescue strategy and clearly showing the child below the surface of the earth; thus the networks used visual as well as verbal redundancy.

These resorts to redundancy accomplished two purposes. First, they created a mental picture of the trapped child; second, the redundancy highlighted the helplessness of the child thereby arousing feelings of concern and protectiveness. Perhaps these feelings led to some of the donations of money, numerous gifts and phone calls from around the country.

Reporters' apparent questions and selection of sound bytes seemed to lead the viewers toward a sympathetic view of the victim and a sense of identification with the rescuers. Overall, these choices did lead to a strong sense of identification with the rescuers. Allowing the rescuers to tell how they felt digging in the tunnel and hearing Jessica

McClure scream provided powerful images. These images could only have come from the rescuers themselves and the reporters must have instinctively known that. Reporters are trained to put the best angle on their story and these choices of sound bytes accompanied by visuals of the rescuers afforded the reporters the strong images that network news demands.

Throughout the rescue, slight differences between the networks coverage surfaced. For example, while CBS and ABC chose to use the Jessica McClure story as the lead on October 16, the NBC network chose to place the story farther back in the newscast. CBS, however, portrayed the rescue more dramatically in its depictions than the other two networks. The best example of this dramatizing of the rescue appeared in Dan Rather's lead-in of October 16; while the other two anchors related that the rescue had been frustrating, Rather's lead-in went beyond mere relation of the events:

After two-and-a-half days, rescuers are inches away from saving the toddler in the well. First, about that desperate and delicate digging operation still underway tonight in Midland, Texas, trying to rescue Jessica McClure. She's still stuck between that rock and a hard place, a dry well shaft, twenty-feet down. Rescuers now close enough to touch, to talk, but not, not yet to retrieve her.



Bruce Hall is there to report  
on the drilling and hoping for  
a parent and child reunion.

This was by far the longest lead-in of any of the network stories during the rescue. The fact that CBS' depictions tended to be more dramatic may have been nothing more than the quest for ratings.

These five characteristics--literalness, concreteness, redundancy, reporters' choices of sound bytes and differences among the networks--combined to create the public's understanding of the rescue event. As chapter three will demonstrate, these factors do not always characterize media coverage of a rescue effort.



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### Chapter 3: Water, Water Everywhere!

First spotted October 7, 1988, three relatively young California Gray whales were trapped in a pool of slush, too frightened or confused to swim through the slush to open water and from there to their wintering waters off the coast of Mexico. Two biologists in nearby Barrow, Alaska, had hoped to find an icebreaker nearby that could clear a channel for the three whales. However, no American icebreaker was stationed in the area. It appeared that the whales were doomed, victims of their immaturity and environment. The two biologists did not want to waste the opportunity before them and so contacted a technician at the Barrow television station to get some videotape of the whales for further study.

A week later, October 13, that video appeared on the NBC Nightly News in the final segment. The story was relatively short, but it was enough to ignite the interest of the viewers watching. On October 15, the whales led the NBC newscast. The whales first appeared on the ABC World News Tonight on October 16, and the story made the CBS Evening News October 17. From October 17 until their disappearance and

presumed rescue October 28, the whales remained a nightly news story.

A drama metaphor became the leitmotif of the network depictions of the whales rescue. As Kenneth Burke points out, "any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)."<sup>1</sup> This chapter will describe how the dramatistic network depictions of the whales' rescue featured these five elements plus "plot."

The whales first appearance on network television came on October 13 on NBC. Tom Brokaw did a voice-over<sup>2</sup> of the story in the final segment. Brokaw gave the essentials of the situation: three Gray whales were trapped in the freezing Beaufort Sea and could not break free; biologists had hoped that an icebreaker was stationed nearby but one was not available. Throughout the story the video showed pictures of the whales coming up to breathe; viewers, in fact, could both see and hear the whales as they came up to breathe. The viewers could see the white Artic background and the enormous whales trapped in what appeared to be a very small hole.<sup>3</sup>

On October 15, the story of the whales led the NBC newscast. By this time rescuers had begun



formulating a plan to use a hoverbarge to clear a channel for the whales. However, the workers did not know whether the military had a helicopter large enough to tow the hoverbarge; nor did they know whether the military would supply one if it did exist. The October 15 story also discussed a second option, allowing the Eskimos to take the whales as food.

Throughout the story, video showed the whales surfacing to breathe in the holes in the ice. Different angles showed the breathing holes up close or in the foreground with nothing but ice behind them. These pictures gave viewers a sense of the isolation of the whales from the water.

On October 16, both ABC and NBC carried the whales' story. Both stories focused on the devised rescue plan; rescuers had scheduled a Sky Crane helicopter to tow a hoverbarge from Prudhoe Bay to Pt. Barrow. The NBC story reported that the Barrow Whaling Association had decided to help the rescue operation.

In both stories the video consisted mostly of sound bytes from biologists and Eskimos and more pictures of the whales surfacing to breathe. The performance metaphor had not become obvious at this point, although the video had begun to set the scene. Showing the whales in their breathing holes in a vast

Arctic field of ice gave viewers a sharp image to identify with the rescue effort.

On October 17 all three networks carried the whales' story and the performance metaphor was established as the dominant metaphor for the remainder of the rescue effort. By October 17 various groups had arrived on the scene of the rescue to offer help. Biologists, oil companies, the Greenpeace environmental group and the military became involved. However, on this day rescuers could do nothing but hurry up and wait. Volunteers used chainsaws to try to enlarge the breathing holes while the rest of the rescue team waited for a hoverbarge to be towed from Prudhoe Bay. The towing process took longer than expected.

Four aspects of the performance metaphor emerged during the newscasts of October 17: the agents, scene, plot and agency. First, the characters were identified as the whales and rescuers. Reporters described the whales as "battered and bleeding and near exhaustion,"<sup>4</sup> "trapped,"<sup>5</sup> "stranded,"<sup>6</sup> and "battered and weakened by their constant battle."<sup>7</sup> These descriptions came early in the stories as did establishing the rescuers as characters. CBS described the rescuers as "An unprecedented alliance of Eskimo whale hunters, Greenpeace environmentalists, big oil interests, the government, and the military."<sup>8</sup> NBC called the rescuers "a very unlikely coalition of people."<sup>9</sup>



The rescuers descriptions identified them as coming from different groups and therefore different points of view. However, naming the group as an "alliance" or "coalition" gave the impression that all these different people were rescuers with one focus.

The scene was established early in the stories. In the CBS and NBC stories the anchors set the scene. Tom Brokaw set the scene during his lead-in to the story: "It was fourteen degrees below zero today off the coast of Alaska. . . . The whales are stranded by ice that formed early this season."<sup>10</sup> The CBS anchor, Dan Rather, set the rescue scene during his voice-over: "These whales have been trapped for more than a week in record sub-zero cold near Pt. Barrow, the northernmost community in the United States."<sup>11</sup>

The video show during each story significantly affected the scene. Showing vast stretches of Artic ice with the two breathing holes cut in them gave viewers a better idea of how desperate the situation really was. The scenes of the Artic ice field presented a different picture of reality for most viewers.

The stories of October 17 established the plot of the drama. The plot emerged as the whales in a war with nature. The plot contained an ironic point in that nature produced both the whales and the ice; thus two sides of the same coin were fighting each



other. The plot sprang from depictions such as the statement that "the three Gray whales are fighting for their lives."<sup>12</sup> NBC's Don Oliver said "The stranded whales are no longer alone in the effort to escape from their icy prison and find the open sea."<sup>13</sup> CBS said the whales' battle had "left their noses worn right down to the bone."<sup>14</sup> ABC described the activity around the whales "as they fight desperately to stay alive."<sup>15</sup> These depictions established the plot for the remainder of the rescue drama. Living embodiments of nature struggled for life, war prisoners of the cold, non-living forces of nature. Small wonder that this conflict would captivate an audience which would have no trouble choosing sides.

The agency emerged in the stories of October 17 in the form of a hoverbarge. Rescuers waited for a hoverbarge to cut a channel for the whales and until it arrived, enlarging the breathing holes was all that could be done. The hoverbarge made slow progress.

On October 18 the major event in the whale rescue had nothing to do with the whales, per se, but that President Reagan was interested in the whales. The whales' situation remained unchanged; they were still trapped, still surfacing to breathe every few minutes and still waiting for the icebreaking hoverbarge to make its way from Prudhoe Bay. Each network reported

that the winds had turned favorable for the whales' rescue. This meant that the wind had shifted and was breaking up the ice pack, opening up more water nearer to the whales. If the hoverbarge could get to Pt. Barrow before the wind shifted again, the rescue would be much easier.

President Reagan telephoned the rescuers. He told them that "Everybody down here, their hearts are with you and our prayers are also with you. Anything that we can say or do to help you along with the success of the operation, we'd be pleased to do it."<sup>16</sup> The President's phone call was the real news of the day; after all it was the only thing that man had done; nature shifted the winds.

The scene emerged as the dominant aspect of the drama during the October 18 broadcasts. The fact that the wind could break up the ice pack may have been new information to people not living in an Arctic climate. This information added further to the sense of the unknown and made the scene more distant and dramatic in the minds of the viewers. Two of the networks told viewers that the shift in the winds was "dramatic." CBS said: "Even Mother Nature is getting involved in the rescue attempt; there was a significant change in the weather today. A dramatic and favorable shift in the winds which could help break up the ice pack and make it easier for these



whales to escape."<sup>17</sup> NBC reported that there had been "a dramatic change in the weather in the Arctic Ocean today. Winds changed and began blowing from the East that caused the ice pack to shift and break up."<sup>18</sup> The ABC broadcast reported that "winds turned more favorable today for keeping the channel open buying precious time for a rescue effort."<sup>19</sup> Those depictions kept viewers focused on the unfamiliar climate while nothing was happening in the rescue itself and at the same time preserved the sense of drama.

Descriptions of other whales migrating added to the scene. CBS reported that these other whales were nearby and might possibly help the trapped whales, "Out just beyond the whales' intended escape route, other whales, Bowheads, frolicked today. Whales better attuned to icy conditions. Officials hope they will lead the trapped group to safety."<sup>20</sup> NBC reported that "large channels of water could be seen with migrating Bowhead whales moving through them."<sup>21</sup> These whales following their natural behavior patterns had an indirect effect on setting the scene. In order to show the migrating whales, cameramen had to video some place other than the breathing holes of the trapped whales or the town of Barrow. This new video showed channels of open water, that did not look very open since pieces of ice and small ice sheets remained



in these channels. These pictures of the whales in the channels gave the rescue effort the look of a nature documentary and added to the exotic feel of the scene.

The stories of October 19 differed from network-to-network. Both ABC and NBC focused on the fact that the hoverbarge had still not arrived. The ABC story made a brief mention of the interest generated by the whales. The NBC story mentioned that this sort of event happens often in the Arctic; these trapped whales were not the first.

CBS also mentioned that the entrapment of the whales happens every year in the Arctic, but focused mainly on the enormous interest in the whales. The CBS story consisted mostly of sound bytes, including one that compared the rescue of the whales to the rescue of Jessica McClure: "It's a human drama, it's compelling, it's another Jessica McClure story where everyone in the country is watching to see what's going to happen to these whales."<sup>22</sup> The CBS story did not explain the fascination with whales but merely highlighted it.

The agents emerged in the stories of October 19. CBS emphasized the whales by examining in detail the interest in them: "Correspondent Richard Roth looks at the attraction of the whales in our age of high tech and high cynicism. . . . Whether it's stuck

in Alaska, stranded on a New England beach or swimming in the Sacramento river, there is something about a whale we seem to find irresistible."<sup>23</sup> This story added an aura of mystery to the whales. The story attributed the whales with a mystical power of attraction without explanation.

The ABC story emphasized the Eskimos and the federal coordinator, Ron Morris as agents; first the Eskimos: "The onlookers include Eskimos who, ironically, are allowed by law to kill whales for food. 'Normally we just go out and hunt for them, but coming out to just watch them, its' fun.'"<sup>24</sup> Next, ABC highlighted Ron Morris, "Ron Morris, the federal coordinator has been swamped. 'Dynamite, why don't we use dynamite?'"<sup>25</sup> By emphasizing the Eskimos and Ron Morris as agents, ABC actually focused attention away from the whales. Not much could be said about the whales themselves at that point since nothing had changed. This story allowed the viewers to see some of the other players.

The NBC story focused on the whales as agents. The NBC reporter said the whales' behavior seemed better: "They are not nearly as sluggish. The feeling is that they are strong enough to make the swim if the icebreaking hovercraft arrives to clear a path."<sup>26</sup> Only NBC reported that the whales' behavior seemed better. This added positively to the whales' image



and at this point in the rescue to have cast doubt on the whales' ability to survive could have proven unpopular with viewers as well as story editors.

On October 20 the only real news was that the breathing holes had been in danger of freezing over the night before. Slush and ice had formed in the holes faster than rescuers could scoop it out. Just as the outlook appeared bleak, two men from Minnesota arrived with de-icing equipment. The workers hooked up the de-icing equipment to a portable generator and dropped it into the breathing holes. Within minutes a noticeable improvement had occurred and eventually the equipment removed the ice from both holes, and the whales seemed to like it. The extraordinary part of the story about the two volunteers, aside from the fact that they paid their own way to Barrow, Alaska (not an inexpensive trip), was that they came to Barrow after their offer of help had been turned down. Only NBC mentioned this fact.

Other than the de-icing equipment, the whales' situation remained essentially the same. The hoverbarge remained closer to Prudhoe Bay than Pt. Barrow, the whales were about the same and the rescue continued to generate interest. Both the CBS and ABC reported that officials had begun investigating new approaches to the rescue; an aerial masher was



being considered. The aerial masher was a 14,000-lb. cement block, lowered by helicopter in order to break the ice.

The characters and the agency emerged in the October 20 broadcasts. The two men from Minnesota emerged as characters: "Skruzacek and his brother-in-law flew here on their own after their offer of help had been turned down."<sup>27</sup> ABC said "The water agitating machines were brought up here by two volunteers who paid their own way because they wanted to help."<sup>28</sup> These two men remained in the news only for one day; however, their de-icing equipment remained until the rescue's end.

The aerial masher emerged in the drama as a new agency: "They may bring in an aerial masher, a helicopter swinging a huge concrete block to begin breaking up the ice around the whales while awaiting the primary rescue vehicle. The ABC reporter indicated that the masher was being considered because of the hovercraft's delays, " since it now appears the hovercraft is going to take a lot longer to get here than expected, rescue officials say they plan to try breaking the ice by repeatedly dropping a 14,000-lb. cement block on it from a helicopter unless the barge gets here by tomorrow."<sup>30</sup> Until October 20, serious consideration had only been given to the hoverbarge

as a means of rescue; considering the aerial masher meant that rescuers had to try to do something. Viewers got the feeling that rescuers had tired of waiting for a plan that was beginning to look doomed. Showing rescuers formulating other plans for the whales' rescue gave viewers the sense that the rescue was finally going to get under way.

A break-through in the rescue of the whales took place in the broadcasts of October 21. The whales began to participate in their own rescue. The rescue workers created a new breathing hole one hundred feet farther from land in the direction of open water. A de-icing machine had been dropped in to the hole and a light had been shown into the hole as well. The whales followed the lead and emerged in the new hole. Rescue workers hoped that the whales had associated the sound of the de-icing equipment with open water and would, therefore, continue to follow the sound.

In other news about the whales, it appeared that the reporters had given up on the hoverbarge as a means of rescue. The only mentions of the hoverbarge reported that it remained over two hundred miles away in Prudhoe Bay. Reporters focused on the aerial masher. The masher had been scheduled to begin breaking a channel in the ice the next day.

The characters and the agency emerged in the



broadcasts of October 21 as they did in the previous day's broadcasts. The whales became the central agents in the drama during these broadcasts. CBS said that rescue had taken a new turn with the "rescue teams teaching the whales to save themselves."<sup>31</sup> ABC said that rescuers had been able "to lure the whales to a third breathing hole."<sup>32</sup> The fact that the whales had moved gave them a new identity as characters in the drama. Since the whales decided to help themselves they were no longer the helpless victims of the rescue. The rescue workers felt that the whales' movement was significant. "Marine biologists said it was the first significant step toward saving the animals."<sup>33</sup> With the movement of the whales came a second rescue plan: "The whales' rescue team has gone to Plan B, trying to break a series of holes in the ice hoping the whales will move from one breathing hole to another."<sup>34</sup> NBC reported about the whales' movement that "Rescue coordinators think that is very significant in the quest to move the sea mammals toward open water."<sup>35</sup> It was ironic that the first significant step toward the rescue's success came from the whales, not man.

The agency emerged in the broadcasts of October 21, or more specifically, the fact that a new agency had to be tried: "Moreover, everyone agrees that Plan A, the movement of an icebreaking hovercraft from



Prudhoe Bay, is not working. . . . If Plan B fails, there is now a Plan C and that is to net the whales in one of the holes in the ice and carry them by helicopter sling to open water."<sup>36</sup> CBS reported that "a giant Sky Crane helicopter arrived to begin an operation that could hurry up the process."<sup>37</sup> ABC also reported that "An Alaskan National Guard helicopter flew in a huge 10,000-lb. concrete weight from Prudhoe Bay."<sup>38</sup> Again a bit of irony arose out of the rescue; while reporters focused on the "high tech" methods rescuers tried, the method that worked received only brief mention. The Eskimo crews' cutting holes in the ice with chainsaws seemed to be the only agency that the Artic cold did not bring to a stand still. However, it would take at least another day for the Eskimos to emerge as either an agency or agent.

Since October 22 was a Saturday only CBS and NBC had broadcasts. These two networks had another significant piece of information to pass along that night. One of the whales, the smallest one, had disappeared and presumably died. The death of the small whale came in sharp contrast to the progress being made by the other two whales.<sup>39</sup> The two remaining whales appeared to be following the chain of breathing holes toward open water. CBS and NBC discussed the use of the Sky Crane helicopter and the battering ram used to punch holes in the ice.

The CBS story told of yet another piece of equipment to be tried--an Archimedian Screw Tractor.

The whales and the Eskimos appeared as major agents in the drama during those broadcasts. The central agent of the Saturday episode of the Artic drama was the dead whale, the one named Bone. Both newscasts featured Bone; CBS said: "The smallest and weakest of the trapped whales is missing, an apparent victim of its struggle for survival. There was no sign today of the whale named Bone for the severe gashes on its snout."<sup>40</sup> NBC reported that "The third California Gray whale slipped beneath the ice about six last night and has not been seen again. Marine biologists say the missing whale, the smallest one, had fresh cuts yesterday indicating that he was losing his navigation ability. He was also surfacing much later than the two larger whales."<sup>41</sup> Viewers had seen this animal for well over a week, it had become a sort of national pet. The loss of any life could be regarded as sad; the loss of a pet may be considered tragic by some. The whales took on a human quality by the use of the male pronoun "he" rather than "it." The use of the animal's name added to the feeling of intimacy and loss. The whale's disappearance was made especially poignant by the fact that the outlook for the other two whales had turned promising.



Eskimos became agents in these broadcasts as well: "dozens of Eskimos . . . the Eskimos are able to cut about. . . . At the rate the Eskimos are cutting."<sup>42</sup> CBS said that "One official called it Innupiat power for the native residents who manned the saws."<sup>43</sup> The Eskimos became the rescue team in the broadcasts of October 22, where before they had merely been a part of the team. However, it is interesting to note that while the Eskimos symbolized the rescue workers, they were not in charge. "Officials" controlled the operation:

Rescue officials confirmed today.  
 . . . Officials still had hopes  
 they could save the other two  
 whales . . . One official called  
 it. . . . Officials say a pontoon  
 drilling rig. . . .<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, "officials" were in charge while the Eskimos did the work.

The agency emerged on the 22nd as well. In broadcasts on this date the line between agency and agent became blurred because the Eskimos could have been considered as both. The Eskimos functioned not just as rescuers but also as the means for cutting the holes to open water. The rescue effort had tried a "new" tactic: manual labor. "Dozens of Eskimos, most of them being paid by the hour by the North Slope



Borough, are cutting one hole after another across the Artic ice pack."<sup>45</sup> CBS stated that "The crews resumed the job of cutting a chain of breathing holes toward open ocean."<sup>46</sup> The agency had become the manual labor of the Eskimos, despite all the high tech equipment available to the rescue team.

ABC had the only broadcast of October 23. The ABC story differed from any other story throughout the rescue event. The story focused not on the act, agent, agency, scene, purpose or plot, but rather on those sent to Barrow to cover the story. The story highlighted some of the absurdities faced or created by the press during such an event, including paying twenty-two dollars for a cup of coffee. According to the ABC reporter, "At Pepe's Mexican restaurant, prices on the breakfast menu have risen steadily in direct proportion of the worldwide interest in the whale rescue."<sup>47</sup> In other words, the more reporters that came to town, the more it cost.

The story focused on what stories other reporters were doing on an uneventful Sunday in Barrow, "We're doing the same thing you are, which is a story on the media covering the story. I don't know if it's a good sign when the media is covering each other on a story."<sup>48</sup> The story also poked fun at the rescue and the media themselves: "Matter of fact I hear there's a trout caught in the Chinook River down in

Fairbanks. I think we should all go down there."<sup>49</sup>  
In essence, this feature served as a spoof of the drama by focusing on the "producers."

October 24 began the last week of news coverage of the rescue event. The most interesting news concerning the whale rescue involved the Soviet Union. The Soviet Navy was sending two icebreakers to help free the whales. Only ABC and NBC reported this fact and only the NBC story treated the impending arrival of the Soviets as significant. The CBS story had been reduced to a voice-over by Dan Rather, who stated only that the Eskimo crews were working to cut fresh breathing holes for the whales in an effort to get them nearer to open water and that a one-of-a-kind screw tractor had undergone a test run.

ABC focused on equipment and plans that were being used or developed to save the whales. NBC focused basically on the same information as the ABC story however NBC did go into more details about the Soviets. NBC stated that the Soviet icebreakers should arrive by 10 P.M.

The scene emerged in these broadcasts. Words and video set the scene. Showing the breathing holes as well as the equipment being used to free the whales gave viewers sharp images on which to focus. The reporters' depictions also set the scene. NBC reported: "By the light of the Arctic moon, the battle



to save the lives of the two stranded whales continued."<sup>49</sup> The ABC reporter chose to focus on the military aspects of the scene, "The whale rescue operation is beginning to look like a military invasion."<sup>50</sup> These descriptions gave viewers of the rescue scene the feeling that rescue workers were gearing up for battle. The video being used added to the battle scene in the ABC story in particular. While the reporter described the scene, video was shown of each piece of equipment: "They're using huge C-5 Galaxy transports to haul in equipment, as well as Sky Crane helicopters, Huey assault choppers, snow mobiles and teams of Eskimos who are cutting more holes in the ice today."<sup>51</sup> These military images set the scene for war.

October 25 broadcasts told of the arrival of two Soviet icebreakers to help with the whale rescue. The icebreakers had been called in to break through a pressure ridge, a ridge of ice approximately two hundred yards wide that blocked the whales' exit to open water. American leaders of the rescue effort met with Soviet officers to plan a course of action for freeing the whales. The meeting took place aboard one of the Soviet icebreakers (Soviet territory). American officials felt that the Soviets would have no problem breaking through the pressure ridge.

The agents sprang forward as the most important



fact of the drama during these broadcasts. The Soviets had become players; their arrival seemed to herald good news: "American experts have explored the ridge, sometimes within site of polar bears, and think the Russians can easily crack it. 'I would love to hear their reaction when they actually come up to it and see it, they probably think it is a sand box.'"<sup>52</sup>

American rescuers counted on the Soviet abilities:

"We're convinced that the vessel can come in and within a matter of hours actually clear a path through that ridge."<sup>53</sup> American predictions were favorable:

"American ice experts say the icebreakers should have little difficulty in navigating the waters near the trapped whales and breaking up a thirty foot-thick pressure ridge of ice."<sup>54</sup>

The whales came to the forefront as agents once more. They did not want to follow the route of breathing holes cut for them, supposedly because the water at one point along the route was too shallow:

NBC: The two California Gray whales are following their normal routine, coming up to breathe every five minutes or so but they have only moved about a mile down the chain of holes that the Eskimos have cut in the ice. Today, the Eskimos were beginning cutting ice holes in a different direction, trying to bypass the shallow area.<sup>55</sup>

ABC: The whales will not follow the original path of breathing holes since the water underneath is too shallow. So Eskimo work crews are now cutting a new route through deeper water to lead them out.<sup>56</sup>

CBS: Scientists continue working on another problem: coaxing the whales to use the route. Meanwhile native crews have begun carving a possible detour for the whales around a shallow area that apparently presents a psychological obstacle to them.<sup>57</sup>

The whales had not only begun to take part in their own rescue but had also begun sending messages to their rescuers. The message seemed to be that they would participate in the rescue, but only if they considered it safe. The depictions humanized the whales. They had become almost like small children going to a doctor's office. They required coaxing, and despite the fact that the shallow spot held no danger for them, they were still afraid, much like a child at a doctor's office. Reporting that the whales faced a "psychological obstacle" gave them the human quality of "it's all in your mind."

Video set the scene. The pictures that contributed most significantly to the scene consisted of polar bears. All three network broadcasts of October 25 had the bears, which had been mentioned as a threat to the whales throughout the rescue but had not been shown. On October 25, however, the networks had polar bears to show. Why the pictures of the polar bears were considered necessary remains a mystery; however, the possibility exists that the cameramen got the video of the bears and accordingly the reporters used it.



The anchors' lead-ins of the October 25 stories set the plot for the drama for ABC and CBS. CBS stated: "With their arrival at the northern rim of Alaska, the stage is set for a climax to this long suspense story."<sup>59</sup> ABC reported that "everyone involved seems to be planning for one final push, no matter what it costs."<sup>60</sup> These statements gave viewers the impression that the rescue would end dramatically. These depictions of a dramatic ending may have given viewers a false preview of events.

The whales' rescue led the NBC Nightly News on October 26 even though little had changed. The whales were swimming better and the change in their activity had scientists excited, but they remained in the chain of breathing holes that had been carved for them. The Soviet icebreakers had come to within a quarter-to a half-a-mile of the breathing holes, smashing the pressure ridge. Now the rescue workers had to carve the breathing holes the rest of the way to the channel. Reporters predicted that the whales would be free within a few hours: "Officials still hope to complete the whales' rescue within a few hours."<sup>62</sup> Some reporters said the whales would be out by the end of the day, "and before the day is over, officials here say if all goes well, the whales should be on their way."<sup>63</sup>

The whales emerged as the agents in these stories. The reporters focused on the whales behavior. "Marine biologists said there was a dramatic change in the whales' activity as the icebreakers came closer and closer. They began swimming vigorously back and forth from one breathing hole to another almost as if they knew something was about to happen."<sup>64</sup> CBS spoke with an observer: "I stayed with them all night long and they just look wonderful. It's almost like they sense something's going on."<sup>65</sup> NBC reported that the whales' condition looked better than at any time during the rescue: "The whales were swimming better than at any time since they were first spotted nearly three weeks ago. They were running down the last quarter mile of holes, surfacing in one hole after another right to the end."<sup>65</sup> Again the reporters assigned the whales human qualities. Bestowing the whales with human qualities of anticipation and exhilaration that rescue appeared imminent allowed viewers a more positive outlook for a successful rescue. Had the whales appeared sluggish or had they been described as apathetic or unmoved by the activity around them, viewers would have been forced to consider the possibility of an unsuccessful rescue. By using positive human



characteristics to describe the whales, reporters kept the outlook positive.

The plot emerged in the anchors' lead-ins as it had the night before. The lead-ins led the public to believe that a dramatic rescue would occur any minute. Tom Brokaw led into the story with "Some time before this night is over the two whales should be out of their icy cell and on their way to California."<sup>66</sup> Dan Rather spoke about the Soviet's involvement: "Freedom appeared to be at hand tonight for two California Gray whales trapped in the Arctic these past three weeks. Soviet icebreakers and American rescuers combined efforts to bring a saga that will surely be the stuff of song and legend to a happy ending."<sup>67</sup> Peter Jennings spoke about freedom not only for the whales, but also for the rescuers: "With a little luck, the ordeal of those two trapped California Gray whales and of the small army working to free them from the ice off the Alaska coast may be over within hours."<sup>68</sup> The plot for the nightly episode of the Arctic drama had the whales swimming free, probably before the next newscast. In more dramatic terms, the war between the ice and the whales was nearing a close and reporters predicted a victory for the whales.

However, on October 27, those predictions still had not come true. The whales remained trapped by

ice, although not in the original breathing holes. The channel carved by the Soviet icebreaker had frozen solid overnight. The whales had moved into the channel but were trapped there. Eskimo crews began carving new holes in the ice to lead the whales out and the whales followed them. Apparently the noise of the chainsaws attracted the whales. Predictions called for victory.

The whales appeared as agents in these broadcasts. Although they had attempted to leave, nature foiled them again.

NBC: The whales sounded, then reappeared in the channel left by the icebreakers. . . . But the whales still had to surface amid jagged chunks of ice, one of them had fresh cuts, and the two California Gray whales refused to move on. They had made it just 1000 yards down the channel by nightfall.<sup>69</sup>

CBS: But in temperatures of eighteen below, the channel kept freezing over. When they were discovered today, the whales were bleeding from new cuts, bobbing for air in small openings. But somehow they had battled their way <sup>70</sup> more than a mile toward open water.

The whales emerged again as the central agents of the drama. Since the rescue effort began to save the whales it seemed only fitting that they should be the focus of attention in the last few stories. Having taken part in their own rescue the whales



now were being portrayed as active participants rather than helpless victims as they had been depicted in the early rescue stories.

The Eskimos shared the spotlight with the whales in the broadcasts of October 27. When the story mentioned the whales, a reference to the Eskimos came soon after. Again, the Eskimos symbolized the rescue workers and their determination. "Within minutes, the whales followed the workers lead, swimming into the new holes as fast as they were cut."<sup>71</sup>

The two groups usually appeared in the same sentence, "At midafternoon, the whales were moving again through the holes Eskimos were cutting in the new ice."<sup>72</sup>

Although the whale rescue may best be remembered for the Soviets, without the help of the Eskimos, the whales would have died. It is ironic that the Eskimos played a vital role in the success of the rescue as they could have legally killed the whales before the rescue began. The Eskimos, who have a worship-like regard for the whale, chose to work as rescuers, not as hunters.

Officials' and reporters' predictions finally came true on October 28. The whales had gone. They disappeared after the Soviet icebreaker made three final passes. Even though no one could say for sure what happened to the whales, everyone involved with

the rescue seemed to feel that the whales had made it. A celebration for the rescuers was planned.

The final stories focused on the rescuers as agents. After the disappearance of the whales and completion of the rescue, the agents and the scene were the only aspects of the drama on which to focus. Some of the rescuers were given the chance to speak for themselves:

We all feel that they are no longer trapped and I just feel great about it.

They've had to make it and they're on their way, there's no other explanation for it.

These whales have a will. They've hung on, they're going to hang on some more.

The rescuers were shown leaving the ice and looking at the holes where the whales had been. Whether or not the whales actually made it, the rescuers felt that they did. Showing the rescuers packing up and leaving the ice added a finality to the rescue story: closure came as the long Artic drama came to an end.

Video of the final stories set the remaining scenes. Showing the rescuers leaving not only added finality to the plot; it also returned the setting back to normal. After the rescuers packed up their equipment and left, the Artic was once again natural. Blocks of ice pulled from the breathing holes were



the only evidence remaining. They would melt in the spring. By the next morning, the channel and the breathing holes would be frozen over. Nature was taking back what belonged to it. Man had invaded this pristine, barren environment and now nature would reclaim it.

### CONCLUSIONS

After examining the rescue event chronologically it becomes apparent that several conclusions need to be examined in the context of the entire rescue event. These conclusions focus on the overall depictions of the rescue by the networks.

### PLOT

Establishment of the plot came early in the lifetime of the event. Beginning with the language of October 17 the plot became a war drama as evidenced by the following quotations:

. . . fight desperately to stay  
alive.<sup>74</sup>

. . . by their constant battle  
to surface. . . . A battle that  
has left their. . . .<sup>75</sup>

. . . whales are fighting for  
 their lives. . . . They are<sup>76</sup>  
 battered and bleeding. . . .

These depictions left no room for doubt in the minds of the viewers that a war was being waged. The war existed between the whales and the ice, with the rescuers on the side of the whales.

A certain amount of irony exists in these depictions. One of the ironies has been discussed earlier, that being that the war was fought between two elements of nature. Each year ice traps whales. It is nature's way of weeding out the gene pool, getting rid of faulty genes. However, this time man saw the whales and decided to get involved. Man's involvement was the only reason the plight of the whales made news.

Another irony found in the rescue event itself was that the Soviets came to help. American cold war enemies came together to help wage a war on the cold. The Soviets, never known for their environmental concern and in fact still a whaling nation, dispatched two icebreakers to help free two whales that according to nature should have died. The Soviets had to view this as a public relations opportunity that was too much to resist. "Once the whales are swimming free, the Russians and Americans plan a big victory celebration. Two Superpowers united over the fate



of two whales."<sup>77</sup> Rescuers lauded the Soviets, "Thank goodness for the Russians."<sup>78</sup> The Soviet policy of Glasnost received some of the credit, "ending what has become an international event topped off with a touch of Glasnost."<sup>79</sup> The rescue of the whales approached the credibility of peace talks, "and found the world's two Superpowers working on the same side. The Russian ambassador called it an 'ice summit.'"<sup>80</sup> That kind of good publicity cannot be bought. The whales rescue gave the Soviets a positive image with the people who watched the rescue around the world.

#### SCENE

The scene was established by the first video shown of the whales. A pristine, white, barren ice field provided the scene for all the activity to follow. Although both words and video set the scene throughout the rescue event, video played a more important role for setting the scene. No words could match the video of three huge animals in what appeared to be very small holes, desperately surfacing for air. It is difficult to imagine the kind of cold experienced by northern Alaska, but when viewers see whales surfacing in slush because it has developed so quickly rescue workers cannot keep it scooped out, little imagination is needed.

Other factors helped set the scene. The Eskimos belonged to the scene, although their major contribution lay in their ability to act as agents. When one imagines the Arctic, Eskimos come to mind. By constantly showing the Eskimos and referring to them specifically as "Eskimos" rather than "Alaskans," the Arctic scene became firmly embedded in the minds of viewers.

At one point in the rescue polar bears became vogue. Each network showed video of the bears. These bears helped set the scene because polar bears, perhaps more than any other animal, are associated with the Arctic. They have snow white fur to blend in with their surroundings, which may have further reminded viewers of the snowy, icy setting of the drama.

One has to wonder what the polar bear thought of all the attention. The Arctic is, after all, a polar bear's home, it does not include helicopters and videocameras. Even so, for viewers in the forty-eight contiguous states, showing a polar bear may have been an important step in establishing the scene of the drama.



## AGENTS

The Artic drama of 1988 had a cast of many. These agents fell into several groups: whales, Eskimos, rescue workers and Soviets. The whales, the most obvious group of agents, provided the motivation for the rest of the drama; everything revolved around the whales. Yet, the whales did not remain helpless victims throughout the rescue. Although helpless in that they could not escape without man's help, the whales had to participate in their own rescue. Two of the rescue workers made that point specifically:

The outlook, it looks good, I mean the winds are holding, but these boys are going to have to make up their minds to go.<sup>81</sup>

See, you can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. We're in a situation where we're going to give the whales every opportunity.<sup>82</sup>

The whales had to learn new behaviors such as following the sound of the saws in order to save themselves.

The Eskimos have already been discussed as part of the scene. The Eskimos also had a part as agents in the drama, without them the whales would have died. The most interesting characteristic about the depictions of the Eskimos is the distinction the media made by

referring to them separately as "Eskimos" or "natives." This distinction put some psychological distance in the minds of viewers, almost as if the Eskimos were natives of some foreign country and the reporters and viewers had come for a visit. This is perhaps an unfortunate impression to leave in the minds of viewers as there is already some racism directed toward Eskimos.<sup>83</sup>

The rescuers belonged to various groups besides the Eskimos. Marine biologists, military personnel, environmentalists and others received mention early in the rescue effort as workers. Toward the end of the rescue effort, references to these diverse groups died out and the rescue workers became "American rescuers,"<sup>84</sup> "rescue workers,"<sup>85</sup> or "the Eskimos, Americans and Soviets."<sup>86</sup> The group references seemed to be especially cohesive once the Soviets appeared on the scene. The reporters' seemed to be sending a mixed message; on the one hand, praising the Soviets for coming to help, and on the other, it was still "us" against "them."

Finally, the Soviets became a distinct group of rescuers. The Soviets appeared in the drama late in the rescue, but they got considerable air time. As stated earlier, the rescue provided an excellent opportunity for good public relations. The Soviets appeared very altruistic in the eyes of the world.



The reporters always referred to them by name, either as "Soviets" or "Russians," perhaps because their presence gave a harder edge to the sentimental whale story.

#### ACT

The rescue of the whales constituted the act in the drama. Despite the fact that the rescue was the reason for the stories, the act itself was the focus of very few of them. This may stem from the long delays before any action was taken and from the fact that when the rescue finally occurred it happened at night and not on camera. These factors may have led to other aspects of the drama being focused on more fully, yet despite this fact, the rescue act remained the underlying theme of all the whale stories.

#### AGENCY

A channel cut in the ice comprised the agency of the rescue. However, many times throughout the course of the rescue the channel was referred to as a "path," e.g., "to open a path,"<sup>87</sup> "to clear a path,"<sup>88</sup> and "supposed to open a path."<sup>89</sup> These uses of the word "path" occur mainly before the Soviet icebreakers appeared. After the Soviet icebreaker

arrived, the "path" became a "channel" with references such as "will cut an escape channel,"<sup>90</sup> "through a three mile channel,"<sup>91</sup> or "new ice formed in the channel."<sup>92</sup>

"A track worn by the footsteps of people or animals"<sup>93</sup> is a path according to Webster's New World Dictionary. The word "path" oversimplified the rescue situation. Even after the channel had been cut, the whales could not simply follow it out to open ocean and then on to Mexico. Rescuers were working with water and ice, mediums which are impossible to mark because of their changing natures. Since water has currents, waves and ripples, trying to mark water is akin to trying to mark air. Ice poses similarly difficult problems because it floats, freezes and refreezes.

Using the word "path" led viewers to believe a simplified view of the situation. After all, if all the whales had to do was follow a path to the open water, their rescue should have been easy. After the channel had been cut and "channel" began to emerge in the depictions, a different impression emerged. A channel is "any tube or groove through which a liquid flows, any means by which something moves or passes."<sup>94</sup> The word "channel" gave a more accurate description of the agency for the whales.



PURPOSE

One overriding conclusion that comes under the category of "purpose" is that in all the stories of the whales' rescue, the purpose remains unexamined. Other elements of the drama received a great deal of attention and may have been the reason the purpose remained unexplored. The whales, Eskimos, Soviets, Artic scene, hoverbarge and even the channel received so much attention that no one bothered to ask "Why?" This may have been a case of growing momentum, the "snow ball effect." After so much attention and money had been focused on the rescue effort, could the rescuers have stopped, examined what was happening, discovered that the effort did not merit the expense and told everyone to go home and let the whales die? Probably not since the urge to save the whales came from human instinct. Even the biologists who first recorded the whales wanted to help them, scientists who knew that nature was weeding out the gene pool and yet they still wanted to save them. In the case of the whales, some introspection may have been needed.

Saving these three whales was unimportant to the survival of the species, it would have no effect on Soviet or Eskimo whaling practices, in fact, the rescue would have no practical, long term benefits. The whales should have been harvested by the Eskimos

or the polar bears, so why did the rescue happen? Perhaps because it made the public feel good. Helping these seemingly intelligent, endangered creatures gave the public an opportunity to view the world through "rosecolored glasses" for a little while. Everybody got to be the "good guys." The rescue provided distraction during newscasts usually filled with bad news.

Perhaps guilt was at work in the human conscience. The Gray Whale has been declared an endangered species, as have many other species of whales. In the last one hundred years, man has managed to almost completely decimate a harmless, intelligent species. The past few years have brought more and more stories of the rapid extinction of many species of animals, the cutting down of rainforests leading to even more extinctions, and the slaughter of animals by man because of competition for food supply. Perhaps with all of these events happening around us, knowing that these whales could be saved provided the only purpose necessary for the rescue.



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## Chapter 4: Analog Analysis and Conclusions

This chapter will employ analog criticism to compare the rescue of Jessica McClure and the rescue of the whales at Pt. Barrow, Alaska. The analog will highlight the commonalities in the facts of the rescue situation, the commonalities in the media depictions of the rescue, the differences in the rescue situation and the differences in the media depictions of the rescue. The final part of the chapter will be devoted to the conclusions and implications for future research.

Several commonalities existed in the facts of the rescues. In both cases, a life or lives were threatened. If either rescue had failed, the victim(s) would have died. The physical environment presented the major obstacles to both rescues. In the Jessica McClure rescue, the hardness of the rock hampered rescue efforts. The hard rocks dulled drill bits, thereby taking time away from digging to replace the drill bits, further slowing the rescue's progress. The damp, crowded, semi-dark conditions of the rescue tunnel added to the difficulty of the rescue even more.



Nature hampered the whales' rescue. The temperatures dropped below zero, quickly freezing breathing holes and the rescue channel. The cold also hindered other aspects of the rescue; equipment froze, rescuers could remain exposed to such extreme temperature for only short periods of time, and transportation to and from the scene was limited because automobiles did not function well in such cold temperatures. Another, less discussed, environmental factor that may have added to the difficulty of the rescue effort was the approaching Artic night. For approximately two months, Barrow, Alaska, has no sunshine. The time of year of the rescue meant that the long night was nearing and the days were getting shorter, giving rescuers less time to work.

Each rescue's outcome remained in doubt for some time. Although reporters and officials on both rescues predicted success, success in either rescue was not assured until the victims were actually freed. In the case of the whales, the final success of the rescue effort will never be known since rescuers did not tag the whales. The whales escaped from their holes in Barrow, but whether they successfully navigated their way to Mexico remains unknown.

In addition to the similarities surrounding the rescue situation, some similarities existed within

the rescues themselves. Both rescues were carried out mainly by volunteers. Although some Eskimos in the whale rescue received pay, many other rescue workers volunteered their time, effort and money. Both rescue operations were sustained, intensive efforts. The Jessica McClure rescue operation proceeded around the clock for two-and-a-half days. The effort to save the whales took nearly three weeks of work. Rescuers worked in frigid conditions, cutting breathing holes in the ice and some even kept round-the-clock vigils to monitor the condition of the whales.

The confinement of the victims in both rescues stands out as the most striking similarity between the two events. Jessica McClure fell down an eight-inch pipe and was wedged on her back at the bottom of the well, unable to move. The whales were trapped in holes that were approximately twenty feet by ten feet, proportions that sound large until one considers that the largest whale was nearly forty feet in length and weighed at least sixteen tons. The whales had room only to expose their heads and blowholes. Maneuvering for a breath of air involved considerable finesse for these three large mammals.

While commonalities existed within the rescue situations and indeed, the rescues themselves, commonalities also appeared in the reporters'



depictions of the rescues. In each rescue event, network coverage continued until completion of the event. In the case of the whales, the stories first appeared on all three networks on October 17 and remained as news stories until the whales disappeared and were presumed rescued on October 28, 1988. By the end of the rescue, signs appeared that even the reporters may have tired of the story, such as: "The whales are free and so is NBC's Don Oliver, he too can move to warmer weather."<sup>1</sup>

The Jessica McClure story first appeared in the network newscasts on October 15 and remained a part of the newscasts until October 19, three days after the rescue of the child. The networks continued coverage long enough to be able to predict the child's recovery. This extra coverage gave viewers the chance to actually see the child, something they had been unable to do throughout the rescue operation.

The networks stressed the environmental obstacles in the rescue operations. In the rescue of Jessica McClure, NBC featured the monotony of the effort produced by the lengthy digging process: "It was concentrated tedious effort, and as the hours dragged on, man after man came out of the rescue tunnel only to report that the rock wasn't giving way."<sup>2</sup> CBS highlighted the determination of the workers despite the hardness of the rocks: "But despite their grit,

the geology was defeating the effort, the bedrock almost stopping the jackhammers cold."<sup>3</sup> The ABC report stated that the rescuers "took all day chipping away at the rock, fearful of pounding too hard and collapsing the well on top of Jessica."<sup>4</sup>

Reporters accentuated the environmental obstacles in the rescue of the whales as well. Some emphasized the ice: "The whales are stranded by ice that formed early this season"<sup>5</sup> or "The crews chopped at fresh ice, trying to keep the holes open until an elaborate rescue operation can reach them."<sup>6</sup> At other times, reporters emphasized the cold: "It got so cold here last night that the two breathing holes the whales have been using would have frozen over."<sup>7</sup> Pointing out the environmental obstacles let viewers know that the rescues were proceeding slowly because of forces beyond the control of man and allowed viewers to identify with the rescuers. Everyone can relate to encountering obstacles beyond their control, such as ice forming on a highway. The hardness of the rock surrounding Jessica McClure or the ferocity of the ice surrounding the whales could not have been prevented; therefore rescuers had to learn to manage them.

Reporters' depictions of the rescues featured the rescuers and the victims. In the Jessica McClure rescue, the rescuers received most of the media



attention. This was a logical tactic on the part of the reporters because (1) Jessica McClure was too young to be interviewed and (2) even if she had been old enough, she could not be seen or heard. The rescuers had been in the rescue tunnel and could convey how it felt in the tunnel, hearing the child scream, feeling the dust and the damp and trying to see in the semi-darkness.

In the rescue of the whales, again the stories focused logically on the rescuers. After all, no matter how intelligent environmentalists would have the public believe whales are, trying to interview one would have seemed a little absurd. The rescuers actually participated in the rescue. They had been out in the cold, felt the Artic chill worked with the chainsaws to cut holes in the ice, and in some cases, had actually touched one of the whales. These people made the rescue happen.

Reporters focused on the whales in their depictions. Most of the stories about the rescue included some mention about the condition of the whales. The whales really became the center of attention after they began participating in the rescue. After the whales moved to a new breathing hole, the success of the rescue suddenly seemed brighter and so did the whales.

Throughout each rescue the means of the rescue became a point of focus. During the Jessica McClure rescue, escape for the victim would be through a rescue tunnel. During the rescue of the whales at Pt. Barrow, the channel through the ice would provide the escape route. The rescue stories could not have been told without mentioning the means of escape. If viewers were to believe that the rescue would be successful, reporters had to tell them how to achieve rescue.

Differences existed in the rescue situation just as commonalities existed. The most obvious difference, the victim, was a child in one case and animals in the other. Thus, obviously one might expect viewers to take the Jessica McClure rescue more seriously. The same cannot be said of the press. The press treated the stories as equally important, giving both stories network coverage until their completion.

The rescue of Jessica McClure happened amid familiar settings, a back yard in a small town. The rescue of the whales happened in an environment known only to a few, Pt. Barrow, the northernmost community in the United States. Because of the familiar setting the Jessica McClure rescue was instantly understood; although the strategy may have been complicated the basic premise was simple: rescuing a little girl from a hole in her back yard. The rescue of the whales



may have taken more explanation on the part of reporters for viewers to fully understand what was happening.

Time was the most obvious difference between the rescue situations. The rescue of the whales took nearly three weeks. Jessica McClure was free in two-and-a-half days.

From the beginning of the rescue until the end, the Jessica McClure rescue operation had one plan. The plan never varied: a rescue tunnel would be dug down below the child and then rescuers would tunnel over and up to the child so that she would fall into their arms. The plan was carried out to its completion and a successful rescue.

The whales' rescue went through several plans before succeeding. First, the planners decided to locate an American icebreaker to clear a channel for the whales, but then discovered there was no icebreaker stationed in the area. Second, they devised a scheme to tow a hoverbarge to Pt. Barrow to cut a channel through the ice for the whales; however, the hoverbarge never made it to Pt. Barrow. Third, they planned to use an aerial masher to smash holes in the ice from open water toward the whales. The aerial masher mashed five holes in the ice. Finally, they found a technique that succeeded, using a Soviet icebreaker to smash through a pressure ridge and Eskimos to cut

a chain of breathing holes across the ice toward the channel left by the icebreaker. The rescue of the whales came from a process of trial and error.

The Artic environment where the whales' rescue took place represented the epitome of "clean." Everything was pristine, snow-white. Comparison of the two provided a striking contrast. While the whale rescue featured background video of vast white fields the Jessica McClure background video showed men, covered with dirt and sweat, digging in the earth. The two environments were antithetical to each other.

Differences emerged in the reporters' depictions of the two rescue events, some of them significant. The language used to portray the two rescue events demonstrated the most significant difference. Jessica McClure's rescue was portrayed through literal language; the whales' rescue was portrayed in metaphoric terms. Whales are mystical, unusual endangered creatures. Many environmentalists believe that many species of whales will be extinct by the year 2000, an event that would truly make whales mythical animals. Such creatures may lend themselves more easily to figurative language. The figurative language not only told the rescue story it reconstructed it in the minds of viewers. The whales became two prisoners of war rather than two developmentally retarded whales. The whales were



trapped behind enemy lines and man would have to help with the rescue if they were to make it to freedom.

Jessica McClure needed no transformation, because she was a child her rescue was important. Figurative language dramatized the whales' situation and gave it a sense of importance in the minds of the viewers, a sense of importance that was inherent in the McClure rescue.

In neither of the rescue efforts was the purpose ever questioned. In the McClure rescue, to have questioned the logic or validity of the rescue would have been obscene. Questioning whether or not the whales should have been saved did not bring with it the same sense of moral indecency that questioning Jessica McClure's would have. The difference is that the purpose for saving the whales should have been questioned. Obviously the whales possessed genetic failings or they would not have been trapped in the first place. Saving the whales would have no long-lasting positive effect on the species; in fact, rescuing them may have had a detrimental effect on the species. The rescue of these whales meant that they could reproduce and pass on their faulty genes which could eventually weaken the species.

Although the practicality of the whales' rescue received no mention, the expense was pointed out. One account listed the expense at \$700,000: "A lot

of equipment, a lot of the fuel that's been used was donated. However, two governmental agencies, the North Slope Borough or County and the National Guard estimate that their costs together have now exceeded \$700,000."<sup>8</sup> Another report stated the expense at \$100,000 higher: "The total cost of this unprecedented rescue effort has now surpassed \$800,000."<sup>9</sup> Even though reporters alluded to the expense of the operation, justification for the expense was ignored. A point of difference arises again between the McClure rescue and the whales' rescue; the expense of the McClure rescue was never mentioned, much less questioned.

A second difference in the purpose of the rescues existed. Although the primary goal of the McClure rescue was to save the child, the media created a secondary purpose: restoring pride to Midland. One report phrased the purpose as a gift: "But the biggest gift may have been to Midland itself. After years of bad news in the region's oil-based economy, the good news of pulling together to pull out a little girl."<sup>10</sup> Another reporter said: "They did it. The policemen, firemen, oil field workers of Midland had set themselves to the task and this triumph belonged to them."<sup>11</sup> Finally, Jessica became a source of community pride: "For folks out here, Jessica is the hero, Jessica is a reason to be proud again."<sup>12</sup>



The secondary purpose gave reporters another point to explore, since exploring the feasibility of the rescue would have been unthinkable.

The way reporters set the scene for each rescue differed. Visuals played a much larger part in setting the scene in the Artic rescue. Words could not adequately describe the sweeping fields of ice. Seeing a polar bear gave a much more effective description of the Artic region than anything a reporter had to say.

In the case of the McClure rescue, the words of the rescuers, not the reporters, set the scene. Even though viewers saw the activity surrounding the rescue tunnel and the rescuers covered with dirt, the scene was set by what the rescuers had to say when given the chance to speak for themselves:

The equipment that we were using, we seemed to have a problem to get it to actually chip away any of the rock. We were burning up drill bits and chisel blades we were using, were being dulled due to heat.<sup>13</sup>

It's rough down there, it's, when you're working it's full of dust, it's damp in the bottom and you don't have much room and it's kind of frustrating cause your drill bits just don't do anything to that rock.<sup>14</sup>

These kinds of sound bytes helped viewers identify with the rescuers.

Rescue strategy depictions varied within each rescue. The rescue strategy for Jessica McClure seemed to be rather complex. Each network used graphics in the broadcasts of October 15 in order to clarify the rescue strategy for viewers. The depictions of the whales simplified the situation and presented a false representation of the rescue. As discussed earlier, the use of the word "path" gave viewers the impression that as soon as the channel was cut, the whales would be home free. Such was not the case. The whales had to be coaxed to move and they got stuck again because the extremely cold temperatures caused the channel to freeze quickly. Reporters chose terminology that simplified the rescue from the beginning. The reason for this remains unknown. Perhaps the reporters felt that viewers would not be interested in a complex explanation of the rescue effort. The simplification of the rescue may have had a paradoxical effect on viewers, rather than keeping viewers interested in the rescue, it may have led to a sense of frustration on their part as the rescue effort continued to stall.



### CONCLUSIONS

The rescue of Jessica McClure and the rescue of the whales from Pt. Barrow, Alaska, had their similarities and differences, both in the facts of the situation and in the media depictions of the events. However, three main conclusions have been drawn from the depictions of these events: (1) use of Burke's dramatistic pentad showed how reporters focused public attention away from the most important element of the whale rescue drama, purpose, (2) verbal and visual depictions cannot be separated when studying television news stories and, (3) two different styles of depiction were used to portray two similar events.

Burke's dramatistic pentad plus "plot" was used to analyze the rescue of the whales at Pt. Barrow. Use of the pentad revealed that reporters had focused attention away from the purpose of the rescue and onto other factors such as the agent, agency, scene, or plot. This re-focusing of the public's attention may have kept rescuers from questioning the purpose of the rescue; indeed, analysis of the rescue indicates that reporters did not question the purpose of the rescue or their coverage of the rescue. Re-creating this war of nature in the minds of the public may have recreated the same scene in the minds of the reporters, so much so that they lost their objectivity

about the event. Evidence for lost objectivity lies not in the stories reporters gave, but rather in the ones they did not report. For example, each network reported President Reagan's phone call to the rescuers. However, they failed to point out that in 1986 he had refused to sanction Japan because of their whaling practices, practices that kill approximately 1,200 whales every year. Other "missed" stories by the press indicate a loss of objectivity: (1) The Soviets were still a whaling nation but were helping save three whales; obviously they needed and enjoyed the good public relations the press gave them. (2) What motives of the Eskimos, a whaling people, caused them to join the rescue effort? and (3) Had the rescuers really been interested in helping the whales this money would have been spent for more than rescuing two retarded members of a species that has been growing steadily. Evidently the press got caught up in the drama they had created for the public, mentioning hidden motives of the rescuers or the hypocrisy of the President would not have fit into the picture they had painted.

The press not only missed stories that would have cast a negative light on the rescue and rescuers, they also missed some positive stories that came out of the event. Despite the circus atmosphere of the rescue, scientists did discover some new information



about the Gray whales. Scientist had thought Gray whales could not be trained, yet the rescuers in Barrow trained these two whales to follow the deicers from hole-to-hole. Previous scientific knowledge insisted that Gray whales would not swim through ice, even to save their own lives, yet these two whales did swim through an icy channel in order to get to open water.<sup>15</sup> Evidence from the rescue indicates that Gray whales have more intelligence than previously believed.

Another positive effect of the rescue of the whales came to Greenpeace, the environmental organization. Not only did contributions to Greenpeace rise in unprecedented numbers, but Iceland, a whaling nation whose products Greenpeace members had been boycotting, imposed a two-year moratorium on whaling. The whales at Pt. Barrow became so famous around the world and people apparently identified so strongly with them, that when Iceland announced it would allow its fleet to take seventy-five whales for scientific purposes, the international community retaliated with boycotts of Icelandic products. Iceland had to bow to outside pressure, hence the moratorium. These events took place in the real world, however. The press had created their own world with the whales and the rescuers and apparently wanted no interference from the facts. The press functioned to preserve the story they created.

A second conclusion drawn from analysis of these two rescue events is that both the verbal and visual depictions must be considered when studying television. The nature of television dictates that reporters cannot write their stories without regard for the video. Television consists of both visual and verbal components, and although one or the other may occasionally dominate the message, generally they should be taken as a whole.

Finally, two very different styles of depiction were successfully used to depict two similar events. Depictions of the Jessica McClure rescue displayed a literal nature while the whales were depicted figuratively. These two, unrelated events were actually quite similar in nature yet both times the reporters chose to tell them either literally or figuratively. This cannot be explained by personal styles of the reporters involved since different reporters worked on each rescue. Evidently the basis for the choice of literalness or figurativeness lay in the victim. The reporters depictions seemed to indicate that adventures happen only in myth, not real life: children are reality; whales are fantasy.

Future study should explore the relationship between the media and the pentad: (1) Which factors are focused upon in different types of news stories? (2) Can other, less dramatic, news events be studied



through the pentad? and (3) In other news stories, does the media focus attention away from "purpose" by emphasizing other factors of the pentad?

Although the media have changed in many ways since 1925 when Floyd Collins lay trapped and dying in Sand Cave, in many other ways they remain the same. Reporters will continue to rush to the scene of an unusual event and the public will continue to demand to be informed. However, the media should strive to inform the public about events as they occur, not as the media creates them.

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